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**Nobody Knows But Jesus (And Miss Fanny): A Queer Reading of the  
U.S. Female Slave Archive**

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**Nobody Knows But Jesus (And Miss Fanny): A Queer Reading of the  
U.S. Female Slave Archive**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

### **Nobody Knows But Jesus (And Miss Fanny): A Queer Reading of the U.S. Female Slave Archive**

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Though much has been written across disciplines about chattel slavery within the United States context in the years following (and preceding) Emancipation, little to none of this scholarship has substantively explored the presence and experiences of queer Black women living under this system. *Nobody Knows But Jesus (And Miss Fanny): A Queer Reading of the U.S. Female Slave Archive* works to address this fracture by readjusting the murky and myopic lens traditionally utilized in scouring the archive and supplementing it with a decidedly queerer one. Evaluation of the ways in which enslaved Black women may have embraced gender nonconformity in the face of persistent misogyny, forged complicated connections with white slaveholding women, and found intraracial solidarity with other African American female slaves offers a means by which to more holistically conceive of the agency and politicized pleasure available to these women even in the midst of (near-) absolute domination.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Methodology .....	3
A Review of the Literature .....	4
Chapter 1: Gender Flux, Queer Solidarity, and Sapphic “Hants” .....	10
Gender Nonconformity As Expression and Resistance .....	10
Bucking Heteronormative Trajectories, Creating Support Networks .....	21
Sexual Expression in the Ethereal.....	31
Chapter Two: The Auntie and the Plantation Mistress .....	34
Cruel Mistresses, Encumbered Choice .....	35
Power, Proximity, and Pleasure .....	39
Family Intimates .....	43
Conclusion .....	51
Works Cited .....	53

## Introduction

The memory of slavery is one that pervades the U.S. public imaginary, and yet America's centuries-long dependence on forced labor persists as perhaps one of the most willfully *misremembered* epochs in the nation's history. As Toni Morrison points out in her seminal work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*,<sup>1</sup> American identity is predicated as much on what the majority chooses to elide as it is on the images, narratives, and useful fictions that are permitted to endure. Nowhere are these elisions more evident than in the (seeming) dearth of queer African American women within the official slave archive. Such an omission is undoubtedly motivated less by a devaluation of such women's unique subjectivities (rampant as it may be) than the privileging of a resolutely heterosexual, endlessly exploited and exploitable imagining of Black women on which social understandings of this particular demographic have come to rest. These reductive renderings of enslaved femininity can be challenged and hopefully upended via comprehensive reexaminations of a historical tradition rooted in patriarchy and unabashed misogynoir<sup>2</sup> that utilize a more nuanced, gendered theoretical frame.<sup>3</sup> That is, by reading and writing into the silences and gaps imposed by the violence of subjection, it becomes possible to queer collective cognizance of the archive and thus potentially reclaim it.

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Term coined by scholar Moya Bailey to denote the specific brand of misogyny directed at Black women

<sup>3</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, "Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction," *Signs* 28 (2002).

However, in undertaking such a project, there is an inherent set of politics that come into play, of which one must be conscious if the intent is to produce work that is (re)generative rather than revisionist. For as Saidiya Hartman queries in her haunting piece “Venus in Two Acts:”

What are the kinds of stories to be told by those and about those who live in such an intimate relationship with death? Romances? Tragedies? How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?<sup>4</sup>

In endeavoring to uncover facets of existence for the enslaved that extend beyond suffering, degradation, and death, it is key that the violence of forced forgetting is not merely supplanted by the erasure of emendation. Though the fragmented state of the archive necessitates reading between the lines, it is crucial that one does not (mis)use this practice as a kind of catharsis, reading into the gaps simply what one wishes to see. The anguish of slavery cannot be evaded by the specious writing of romances onto tragedies. However, to deny that the possibility of solidarity, agency, and even love could have existed alongside the isolation, powerlessness, and hatred that typify most recollections of slavery is to deny the enslaved the dignity of complexity. A conceptualization of U.S. slave women that limns them as little more than the atrocities they suffered—no matter how well-intentioned—constitutes an affront; this project will seek to locate long-buried histories of defiance, independence, and affection that work to trouble the continual narrowing of imagined space that African American women are allowed to occupy in America’s social memory.

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<sup>4</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12 (2008): 4.

## METHODOLOGY

In a bid to allow the enslaved to speak for themselves to the greatest extent possible, the primary artifact to be utilized in this study is the cache of transcripts written and archived throughout the course of the WPA Slave Narrative Project,<sup>5</sup> during which over two thousand individuals born into slavery were interviewed about their lives and experiences. Utilizing as a theoretical frame Stephanie M. H. Camp's "politics of the body,"<sup>6</sup> a close reading of the statements gleaned from female participants (constituting roughly half of the total collection)<sup>7</sup> will be performed in order to ascertain the means by which these women conceived of, performed, and found pleasure in their sexualities and gender identities.

Against a long-standing academic praxis by which historical subjects are rendered straight until proven queer, analyses of the archive in this study will resist prescribed mandates to hedge upon a presumption of heterosexuality and gender conformity. For as Matt Richardson points out, "that [the Black queer ancestor] does not exist is a fiction of domination, an effect of trauma that has made her illegible even in alternative archives. To speak of her, one has to be creative."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the only way to broaden

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<sup>5</sup> While the WPA is undoubtedly a valuable resource, it by no means offers a complete, unobstructed view into U.S. slave subjectivities. Power disparities and the likelihood of omissions must be taken into account. These issues of mediation are taken up by a number of scholars, including Thavolia Glymph in her work *Out of the House of Bondage* (see footnote 86). However, as Glymph herself points out, "for many ex-slaves, the WPA interviews represented their only and last formal opportunity to speak openly about slavery," (p. 16) and thus constitute an appropriate, if imperfect, source from which to draw archival material.

<sup>6</sup> See literature review, below.

<sup>7</sup> Constance Sublette and Ned Sublette, *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry* (Chicago, Illinois: Lawrence Hill Books, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013): 14.



understandings of the lives and experiences of enslaved African American women is to take seriously the prospect of a past marked by staunch heterogeneity rather than inured heteronormativity.

## **A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In her piece “Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates,” author Anna Green maps attempts within the field of memory studies to plot the formation and reach of collective memory. Despite the complex yet central role of the individual in these processes, Green contends, that which is ultimately “remembered” (on the collective, cultural, *and* intrapersonal levels) rarely fails to fit “often unconscious social scripts or mental templates”<sup>9</sup> that work to bolster or sustain pre-existing social projects. In the case of Black women’s history within the United States, these projects consist of an entrenched and ongoing limning of African American femininity as a wide set of contradictions: Black women are predatory yet submissive, impotent but inherently culpable, and overwhelmingly straight while somehow still managing to be sexually deviant. That public perceptions persist in pivoting on these (largely nonsensical) paradoxes does not merely indicate a continued illegibility of diasporic identities within the mainstream, but rather a commitment to a construction of Blackness that directly vindicates and indeed even valorizes whiteness by contrast. As Toni Morrison points out, these portrayals serve as “the vehicle by which the

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Green, “Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates,” *Oral History* 32 (2004): 35.

American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, development and preservation of the archetypal white American (and specifically, the white American woman) is and has always been dependent on the mythic Black or “Africanist” Other.

Saidiya Hartman’s piece “Seduction and the Ruses of Power” offers further insight into the means by which hegemonic notions of self within (and beyond) the slave economy were produced on the literal backs of enslaved Black women. Detailing at length the glaring inconsistencies typifying slave-era legal statutes concerning rape and assault, Hartman highlights the ways in which understandings of female slaves that positioned them as “always willing”<sup>11</sup> worked to simultaneously caricaturize and circumscribe these women’s sexualities. While on the one hand, the image of the lascivious plantation temptress contributed greatly to the psychological and literal exoneration of sexually abusive white men, it also virtually eliminated the possibility of queerness in these spaces. That is, while the assumption of Black enslaved women’s abiding sexual availability necessarily came to be viewed as common knowledge, the question of *to whom* this availability extended was routinely eclipsed by a wholesale heterosexist rejection of potential non-normativity.

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<sup>10</sup> Morrison, *Playing In The Dark*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Saidiya Hartman, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” *Callaloo* 19 (1996): 539.

Enslaved women were often able to use this abnegation to their advantage, however, as they drew on the consistently disavowed hypervisibility of African American sexuality to continue a long-standing tradition of utilizing evasion and inscrutability as a means of maintaining and protecting interpersonal relationships that can, in many cases, be read as queer. In his book *Nobody Is Supposed To Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*, Dr. C. Riley Snorton posits that Black sexuality has, for the duration of African-descendent people's time in the United States, existed in what he dubs a "glass closet,"<sup>12</sup> into which spectators can gaze at will and from which it cannot escape. The glass of this closet proves opaque, however, when one considers the ways enslaved Black women employed stealth and performative "ignorance"<sup>13</sup> to create space for potentially sapphic connections and gender diversity while remaining (seemingly) perceptible to probing external observation. Or, as Snorton puts it: "while glass closets, stabilized by biopower and sutured together by institutional and social modes of regulation, may be a condition of Black sexual representation, they are not spaces in which their inhabitants lack the capacity to act."<sup>14</sup> Enslaved women may have been beholden to the predetermined parameters of normative white sexual mores, but they were often able to operate within them in ways that broke with slaveholder dicta and expectations.

Such movement is indicative of a specific set of corporeal politics, upon which Stephanie M.H. Camp elaborates in her work *Closer To Freedom: Enslaved Women and*

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<sup>12</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know*, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know*, 34.

*Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*.<sup>15</sup> Via careful analysis of both slave and planter interviews, Camp identifies an expansive set of resistance strategies deployed by Black women in response to slaveowners' efforts to "master their slaves' senses of pleasure"<sup>16</sup> (often by insisting on chaperoning social events such as holiday parties or prohibiting them outright). These strategies included and centered around a "commitment [by enslaved women] to delight in their bodies,"<sup>17</sup> despite widespread acceptance of those bodies as "inherently laboring ones."<sup>18</sup> Black women pushed back against quotidian dehumanization by indulging in illicit dance parties (where they were free to dance with both men *and* women), plantation fashion culture, and occasionally even binge drinking. Though these practices failed to prove wholly liberatory, they are emblematic of the ways Black women sought to lay claim to their agency and enjoyment within the crushingly oppressive slavery system.

In a move reminiscent of Marisa Fuentes' call to "dwell on the fragmentary...bodies of enslaved women,"<sup>19</sup> Camp contends that Black female slaves' bodies operated as metaphorical trifolds, with the first two bodies amassing and absorbing the barbarity of chattel slavery while the third resisted it.

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<sup>15</sup> Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer To Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Marisa Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016): 1.

Enslaved women's first body, Camp maintains, served "as a site of domination" to be "acted upon by slaveholders."<sup>20</sup> This construction proved most helpful to the slave-owning gentry, as it reinforced notions of Black people as property and Black women as playthings. Sexual violence under this view of African American femininity was thus rendered a seeming impossibility, and enslaved women were construed as passive recipients of others' malevolence.

Relatedly, the second body acted as "the subjective experience" of everyday horrors, and thus was marked by feelings of degradation, demoralization, disappointment, and—in the case of survivors—shame. Enslaved women's second bodies housed the "dark fears and darker realities"<sup>21</sup> of the endlessly fraught prospect of trying to survive as female chattel.

The enslaved woman's third body, however, was "a thing to be claimed and enjoyed, a site of pleasure and resistance." It therefore represented a dual consciousness, by which slaves remained cognizant of their condition and yet staunchly defiant to prevailing expectations that they be bound to it. As Camp explains:

For enslaved women, whose bodies were so central to the history of Black enslavement, the third body was significant in two ways. First, women's third body was a source of pleasure, pride, and self-expression. The enormous amount of energy, time, and care that some bondwomen put into [unsanctioned and often coded-as-queer preoccupations] indicates how important these activities were to them. Pleasure was its own reward for those experiencing it, and it must be a part of our understanding of the lives of people in the past, even—especially—people who had precious little of it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 68.

Using then as a point of reference this notion of a sensual, shrewd, and self-governed “third body,” a more comprehensive means by which to evaluate the presence and subjectivities of enslaved African American women emerges. In moving beyond the compulsory heterosexuality and myopic preconceptions that have typified previous appraisals of the archive, it may at last be possible to glimpse the queer Black female slave within her stained glass closet.

## **Chapter 1: Gender Flux, Queer Solidarity, and Sapphic “Hants”**

In the years of and immediately following the prolonged epoch of chattel slavery in the United States, African American women were able to eke out for themselves space for self-articulation, homosocial connection, and otherworldly sensuality—despite widespread calls for their bodies to remain entities “to be acted upon” rather than enjoyed. Through both tacit and explicit rejection of reductive societal edicts, these women routinely identified and utilized distinctly queer means of not only surviving but thriving within their often grim realities.

### **GENDER NONCONFORMITY AS EXPRESSION AND RESISTANCE**

Black female slaves’ first bodies, in serving as “sites of domination,” acted too as spaces onto which mainstream gender norms could both manifest and encumber. For despite the fact that African American femininity was viewed by the white elite and working class alike as implicitly deficient, female slaves were nonetheless expected to perform a specific brand of womanhood that not only conflicted with many of these women’s self-perceptions, but also produced added difficulties to their often already grueling requisite labor. Univocal emblems of this performance manifested in the “homespun” dresses (generally distributed by slaveholders once or twice a year) that enslaved women were required to wear and which often impeded their ability to complete daily tasks. In spite of these limitations, however, slave women sought to express themselves via attire and adornment, often going to great lengths in order to do so.

The resultant “clothing behavior” of enslaved African Americans, in many cases, included “bondwomen push[ing] themselves to stay up late when they were tired and...direct[ing] some of their extremely limited resources toward dress and style.”<sup>23</sup> This direction extended to trading goods from their gardens to procure “items such as calico, decorative cloth, kerchiefs, [and] ornamental ornaments such as buttons” as well as staying up long after working hours to craft themselves (and occasionally their children) ensembles less rudimentary and infinitely more attractive than the “ragged” ones allotted by slaveholders. The additional labor inherent in such an undertaking was immense, as slave women were obliged to “[grow] and process the cotton, cultivate and gather the roots and berries for the dye, [weave] the cloth, and sew textiles into garments.”<sup>24</sup> However, given that the “fancy dress” produced during these nighttime exertions provided a viable alternative to the standard-issue garb of era (which “reflected and reified slaves’ status and played a role in their subjugation”),<sup>25</sup> enslaved African American women committed themselves to these ancillary activities as a means of seizing subjecthood and “bring[ing] personal expression and delight into their lives.”<sup>26</sup>

Such expression was not limited merely to frocks, however; indeed, enslaved Black women also found ways to “express themselves as individuals through their...bodices, headwear, hairstyles, jewelry, and other accessories.”<sup>27</sup> These adornments were specific to African American women (as is underscored by white reactions to

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<sup>23</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 80.

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Morton, *Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996): 227.



conventions such as “turban” tying, which often bordered on the almost comically nonplussed),<sup>28</sup> and collectively constituted a unique and distinct style that set these women apart without marking them as inferior. For although slave women incorporated items that reflected the styling customs of the time (including hoopskirts):<sup>29</sup>

Black women’s style did not simply mimic [white] slaveholding women’s fashions. Enslaved women’s use of accessories most accentuated their originality.<sup>30</sup>

Given this widespread investment in hard-won (and largely racialized) femininity then, it is key to note that for some African American women, personal expression was achieved not by reclaiming the feminine and tailoring it to fit their circumstances, but rather by eschewing it entirely. These female slaves sought to conform neither to the (impossible) standards of white womanhood nor to the diverse axioms of Black gendered paradigms. Though the “androgynous appearance” adopted by some of these individuals is often regarded as having been “imposed”<sup>31</sup> on them by the demands of the landowning gentry, an assessment of their subjectivities that is not rooted in an assumption of unwavering heteronormativity offers ways of viewing gender non-conformity in the plantation South as a matter of choice rather than expedience.

An anecdote related by former South Carolina resident Victoria Adams proves especially illustrative. In her interview, Adams describes an incident in which she dons a pair of pants owned by associate and fellow slave Bubba to scrub the floor while her

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<sup>28</sup> Morton, *Discovering the Women in Slavery*, 231.

<sup>29</sup> Matilda Brooks, interview with Alfred Farrell, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Florida Narratives, Volume 3.

<sup>30</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 84.

<sup>31</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 79.

mistress, Martha Black, is away. It isn't long before she is found out, however, and upon the family's return, Adams recalls:

Missus told me it was a sin for me to put on a man's pants, and she whip me pretty bad. She say it's in de Bible dat: 'A man shall not put on a woman's clothes, nor a woman put on a man's clothes.' I ain't never see dat in the de Bible though, but from then 'til now, I ain't put on no more pants.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of the fact that she is ultimately compelled by Black's violence to forgo further deviation from established gendered norms, Adams' tale represents a moment of subversion in which both the rigid codes of proper female deportment and the assumed omniscience of her white slaveholders are efficiently contested. Rather than being duly chastened by her mistress' self-righteous recitation of fairly liberally paraphrased religious edicts, Adams defends her gender-bending and even questions whether the biblical passage cited actually exists. In doing so, Adams acknowledges and even seemingly capitulates to the "subjective experience" of laboring under conditions constructed to disallow representative heterogeneity while simultaneously claiming her (third) body as political territory imposed upon but not entirely ruled by white standards of acceptability and propriety. For while it is possible that Adams borrows Bubba's pants simply to be able to complete her chores quickly and more efficiently, the stealth with which she solicits and sports the garment reads more as an indication of the ways Black female slaves "worked hard to make their bodies spaces of personal expression,"<sup>33</sup> even

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<sup>32</sup> Victoria Adams, interview with Everett Pierce, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

<sup>33</sup> Camp, *Closer To Freedom*, 83.

and especially when that expression broke from established precepts of feminine dress and attire.

The “clothing behavior” and unconventional preoccupations of Texan Julia Blanks’ eldest daughter further highlight this point. In detailing the experiences of her family in the years proceeding the War, Blanks discloses that this daughter (whose name is not mentioned):

...used to take the place of a cowboy, and put her hair up in her hat. And ride! My goodness, she loved to ride! They thought she was a boy. She wore pants and leggin’s. And maybe you think she couldn’t ride!<sup>34</sup>

Rather than expressing dismay over her first-born’s unconventional interests and coded-as-masculine mannerisms, Blanks seems to take pride in the young woman’s remarkable aptitude for horseback riding (unusual indeed given that women—both Black and white—were still at this time expected to ride horses sparingly and use saddles designed to allow “ladies” to sit sidesaddle),<sup>35</sup> underscoring the ways enslaved women’s resolution to “delight in their bodies” necessarily translated to a desire to see their loved ones do the same. The disparity between Victoria Adams’ chastisement and subsequent beating upon being discovered in a pair of Bubba’s pants and Blanks’ concession to (and endorsement of) her oldest child’s fondness for hats and “leggin’s” highlights the stakes involved for both whiteness and Black female agency in those moments when African American women claimed and subversively adorned their own (third) bodies.

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<sup>34</sup> Julia Blanks, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

<sup>35</sup> Della Fountain, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Oklahoma Narratives, Volume 13.

In her book *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80*, Marli F. Weiner explores the ways in which “work and womanhood [for slave women] had very different meanings than they did for plantation mistresses.”<sup>36</sup> Considering that the nature and extent of Black women’s labor necessarily excluded them from the ideology of domesticity to which monied white women of the period aspired, gendered expectations varied widely along racial lines.

These distinctions, however, did not free enslaved African American women from inter- and intra-community calls for decorum and virtue, which included, among other things, injunctions to don undergarments that restricted movement<sup>37</sup> and style their hair prior to visitation in order to look just right. Even idle pastimes were dismissed as unladylike, as Amanda Styles’ disclosure that “a ‘oman that whistled wuz marked to be a bad ‘oman” illustrates.<sup>38</sup>

Although Weiner concedes that “Black women were never uncritical imitators of white women,” many *did* look to plantation mistresses for “example[s] of what the...expression of womanhood could mean.” Thus, despite the systematically ensured inability of enslaved African American women to successfully embody and perform white femininity, the prevailing expectation seemed to be that female slaves would perform work similar to that of both Black men and white women while somehow managing to resemble neither. That is, while Black women in the plantation South were

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<sup>36</sup> Marli F. Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998): 113.

<sup>37</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 114.

generally responsible for completing household tasks as well as mastering more onerous skills such as plowing and log rolling<sup>39</sup> (which some had to undertake simultaneously), they were discouraged from and often even punished for “carry[ing] on”<sup>40</sup> in ways deemed coarse, improper, or manly. This fraught liminality is exemplified in South Carolinian Lucy McCullough’s proclamation that Black women “knowed dey hed ter be good [by staying “kivvered up” and compliantly laboring] er dey got beat.”<sup>41</sup>

Some women resisted these socially mandated circumscriptions however, both through their attire (as discussed in the aforementioned narratives of Victoria Adams and Julia Blanks) as well as their behavior. These laborers vocally embraced their strength, agility, and self-determination rather than allowing them to be downplayed or villainized, thus marking these attributes as forms of resistance as well as means of personal expression.

Take for instance the case of Texas resident Anne Clark. In her reflections on chattel slavery, Clark expresses pride not only in her ability to work hard and “make the United States rich” (an employment that she decries as she blames the “Yankees” for coming in and stealing the fruits of her labor), but specifically in her ability to work *just as hard* as her fellow (male) slaves doing the same type of labor. After describing the climate of a beleaguered South in the years preceding Emancipation, Clark relates:

You know, the white folks hated to give us up worse thing in the world. I ploughed, hoed, split rails. I done the hardest work ever a man did. I was so

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<sup>39</sup> Mattie Fritz, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2.

<sup>40</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 115.

<sup>41</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 115.

strong, iffen he needed me I'd pull the men down so the marster could handcuff 'em. They'd whop us with a bullwhip. We got up at 3 o'clock, at 4 we done et and hitched up the mules and went to the fiel's. We worked all day pullin' fodder and choppin' cotton. Marster'd say, "I wan' you to lead dat fiel' today, and if you don' do it I'll put you in the stocks." Then he'd whop me iffen I didn' know he was talkin' to me.<sup>42</sup>

Far from seeking to align herself with the frail (white) femininity of the era, Anne Clark narratively places herself in proximity to men (and, by extension, masculinity) time and again by emphasizing the grueling—and relatively homogenously peopled—aspects of her work. Clark not only does “the hardest work ever a man did,” she does it alongside them, waking up before dawn and “hitch[ing] up the mules.”

Furthermore, Clark's repeated insistence on highlighting her immense somatic strength indicates a divergence from the feminized delicacy of the day—a divergence that Clark wholeheartedly embraces. Her recollections not only of plowing, hoeing, and splitting rails, but also of “pull[ing] down the men so the marster could handcuff 'em” signal both her acknowledgement of the masculinized nature of these mannerisms as well as the pleasure she derives from them, which is communicated less in her straightforward admission of having assisted in “marster's” brutality than in her evident satisfaction in being able to hold her own among male contemporaries.

In fact, when asked what she would like to receive for her upcoming birthday, Clark tells the interviewer not to “bring [her] anything fine to wear” for the occasion because she “jus' wan' some candy.”<sup>43</sup> The message being communicated in this

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<sup>42</sup> Anne Clark, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Clark, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 1.

exchange is subtle yet clear—while other Black women’s efforts and interests may have been directed toward fancy dress and feminine adornment, Clark’s gendered investments lay elsewhere. She would much rather receive a piece of candy than a lavish new dress.

A similar renunciation of traditional feminine embodiment underlies the recollections of Arkansas resident Sarah Smiley, who relates that “when [her] breasts began to grow ([during] adolescence) [she] didn’t want those bumps on [her], and [so she] tied them down with wide rags”<sup>44</sup>—a practice wholly symbolic of the ways enslaved Black women envisaged their bodies as “things to be [re]claimed” as well as sites of subversive self-making. Thus, through the act of binding (which she employs at an early age), Smiley enacts a kind of gendered resistance, delineating her body as a “space of personal expression” by flouting the rigid fixity of presentational customs in the plantation South.

Fanny Clemons’ account of her experiences before the War provides an equally illustrative glimpse into the manifold benefits available to enslaved African American women who embodied and performed various types of gender nonconformity. Beginning her interview with a description of her late mother, who apparently “worked hard in the field like a black stepchild,” Clemons goes on to add that:

I would drink any kind of water that I saw if I wanted a drink. If the white folks poured out wash water and I wanted a drink that would do me. It just made me fat and healthy. Most we played was tussling, and couldn’t no boy throw me. Nobody tried to whip me cause they couldn’t...The biggest work I ever done was farm and we sure worked.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Sarah Smiley, interview with Martin & Barker, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 6.

<sup>45</sup> Fannie Clemons, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2.

Like Clark, Clemons seems to derive a great deal of her self-worth from her willingness and ability to perform physically tasking farm labor, which she describes as “the biggest work [she] ever done.”

Additionally, Clemons’ habit of drinking any and all water that crosses her path (including wash water) accounts in her mind for her having grown “fat and healthy.” This girth however, rather than causing her to fret over her distance from ideal(ized) femininity, lends Clemons the upper hand in “tussling” matches with fellow plantation dwellers. Indeed, she eventually becomes so strong (and heavy) that—as she recalls with glee—“couldn’t no boy throw [her].” Thus, not only does Fannie Clemons’ departure from bodily and behavioral norms allow her to participate in challenging but ultimately remunerative work, it also provides her with some semblance of (admittedly limited) protection from quotidian mistreatment.

This same brand of self-defense characterizes an especially violent anecdote related by Florida resident Irene Coates, which commences with a group of women hoeing in the fields where they spot:

...the overseer, [who] rode along and struck one of the women across the back with the whip. [A nearby female slave] said that if he ever struck her like that, it would be the day he or she would die. The overseer heard the remark and the first opportunity he got, he rode by the woman and struck her with the whip. The woman...whirled around, struck the overseer on the head with [her] hoe...then pounced upon him and chopped his head off...[then] proceeded to chop and mutilate his body...[and] killed his horse. She then calmly went to tell the master of the murder...Without hesitating, the master point[ed] to one of his small cabins on the plantation and said “You see that house over there?” She answered yes.



“Well,” said he, “Take all your belongings and move into that house and you are free from this day.”<sup>46</sup>

The unnamed woman’s employment of (murderous) strength strays so far from the traditionally feminine that it jars her master into manumitting her on the spot. Her outright refusal to submit to masculinist abuse frees her, not only metaphorically, but legally as well. And while such instances were undoubtedly anomalous, Coates’ grisly tale serves to underscore the oft-overlooked complexity (and queerness) of African American womanhood during the slavery era.

The advantages and limitations of such performative nonconformity are perhaps best represented in Arkansas resident Pauline Howell’s recollections of her aunt, who is sold at auction (along with several of her small children) after killing:

...two men overseers. They couldn’t manage her. The last one was whipping her with a black snake whip and she grabbed him. Grabbed his privates and pulled ‘em out by the roots. That was the way she killed both the overseers. ‘Cause she know that was show death. My mama said...[the second overseer] just clum the walls in so much misery that night.<sup>47</sup>

Via her literal and metaphorical emasculation of the foremen tasked with flogging her, Howell’s unnamed aunt pointedly (and ruthlessly) challenges the male authority to which she is yoked by returning and indeed even surpassing the violence to which she is (unsuccessfully) subjected. This victory proves pyrrhic, however, given that—as a direct result of her divergence from conventional feminine submission—she is promptly placed

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<sup>46</sup> Irene Coates, interview with Viola B. Muse, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Florida Narratives, Volume 3.

<sup>47</sup> Pauline Howell, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 3.

upon an auction block and sold. Thus, Howell's tale ultimately serves to demonstrate the ways in which gendered resistance for enslaved African American women often came at a literal price.

### **BUCKING HETERONORMATIVE TRAJECTORIES, CREATING SUPPORT NETWORKS**

For some female slaves, this resistance was not solely corporeal—oftentimes, unwillingness to conform to the rigid criteria of performative femininity was indicative of a related refusal to pursue traditional heteronormative relationships and trajectories. These enslaved African American women, in addition to flouting conventional modes of behavior and attire, often renounced the carnal and reproductive demands on which the chattel slavery system was predicated, abstaining from marriage and eschewing biological motherhood.

Such abstinence was necessarily marked as non-normative, given the material consequences<sup>48</sup> facing Black women who refused to marry or failed to reproduce. Cruelly shrewd slaveholders, looking to expand their profits, would often assign young female slaves to Black men for the purpose of “breeding” and “iffen the woman [didn't] like the man it [didn't] make no difference; she better go or they gave her a hidin'.”<sup>49</sup> Enslaved women's value was typically tied to their designation as “breeders,” and those deemed lacking were routinely dubbed undesirable and sold away.

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<sup>48</sup> Anne Broome, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Ford, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 2.

Even after Emancipation, African American women who forwent marriage or motherhood risked running up against a number of practical issues. Childless women faced the prospect of growing old without adult offspring to provide for them (in the midst of the Great Depression, no less), and while some formerly enslaved individuals avowedly married for love (as in the case of North Carolinian Lucy Dunn, whose interview is actually titled “Aunt Lucy’s Love Story”)<sup>50</sup>, the decision to wed often represented—first and foremost—a sound financial decision. Mattie Fannen, in fact, speaks frankly of marrying shortly after the War in order to “better [her] living.”<sup>51</sup> Despite these rather pressing considerations, however, many Black women persisted in abjuring the normatively domestic.

Take for instance the enigmatic “Aunt”<sup>52</sup> Mandy Buford. Following a series of circumstances not elaborated on in the transcript, Buford comes to stay with former slave Lucindy Allison and her husband until the time of her death. Allison relates that while she and her family work the fields during the day (after Emancipation), Aunt Mandy simply sits around and smokes as the younger children play nearby. Given Buford’s advanced age, however, this fact does not seem to rankle, and Allison even goes on to describe the “cob pipes and cut cane j’ints” her sons make for Buford “to draw

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<sup>50</sup> Lucy Ann Dunn, interview with Mary A. Hicks, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 1.

<sup>51</sup> Mattie Fannen, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2.

<sup>52</sup> Though the term Aunt was often used prior to and proceeding Emancipation by non-Black people to condescendingly address older African American women, it generally connoted respect when used intra-communally. It is the latter usage that is invoked in this text.

through.”<sup>53</sup> Not the least bit nonplussed by her boarder’s singular and decidedly unmaternal behavioral specificities, Allison proceeds to gender Buford in a number of subtle yet markedly queer ways:

Aunt Mandy said her master would be telling them what to do in the field and he say to her, “I talking to you too.” She worked right among the men at the same kind of work. She was tall but not large. She carried children on her right hip when she was so young she dragged that foot when she walked. The reason she had to go with the men to the field like she did was ‘cause she wasn’t no multiplying woman. She never had a chile in all her lifetime.<sup>54</sup>

In emphasizing Buford’s height and her ability to work “right among the men,” Allison is perhaps attempting to underscore what she perceives as Aunt Mandy’s embodied female masculinity, which her master manages to capitalize on despite his ostensible disapprobation. Buford spurns any and all procreative fulfillments inherent to her position as female laborer, never producing “a chile in all her lifetime.” Indeed, children are associated with Aunt Mandy almost entirely in ways that symbolically reinforce her gendered idiosyncrasies: the babies she is made to carry on her hip during her stint as a slave literally and figuratively weigh her down. By refusing to give birth to any of her own, Buford eludes both the onus of mothering and the burden of sexual normativity.

While it is of course possible that Aunt Mandy “never ha[ving] a chile in all her lifetime” is a matter of infertility rather than personal preference, Allison’s insistence on differentiating herself from Buford as one of the “folks like [her] what got children” points to a more subversive explanation. In *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry*, Ned and Constance Sublette evaluate the transcript of former

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<sup>53</sup> That is, Allison’s sons use corncobs to craft pipes for Aunt Mandy to smoke from (or “draw through”).

<sup>54</sup> Lucindy Allison, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Volume 2, Part 1.

Texas slave Mary Gaffney, who—after admitting that she “hated the man” she was forced to marry—adds:

I would not let that negro touch me and he told Maser and Maser gave me a real good whipping, so that night I let that negro have his way...But I still cheated Maser, I never did have any slaves to grow and Maser he wondered what was the matter. I tell you son, I kept cotton roots and chewed them all the time but I was careful not to let Maser know or catch me, so I never did have any children...<sup>55</sup>

Thus, it is plausible that folks “like” Aunt Mandy weren’t the ones who *couldn’t* reproduce, but rather the ones who deliberately decided they *wouldn’t*.

Some enslaved African American women—in resisting their slaveowner’s heteronormative impositions—employed less covert means than the ones detailed in Gaffney’s account, as is made evident in the reminiscences of Virginian Minnie Fulkes, who relates that:

Honey, I don’t like to talk about dem times, ‘cause my mother did suffer misert. You know der was an overseer who use to tie mother up in de barn with a rope around her arms up over her head, while she stood on a block...Dis ol’ man, now, would start beating her nekkid ‘til the blood run down her back to her heels. I took an’ seed th’ whelps and scars for my own self wid dese here two eyes...I asked mother what she done fer ‘em to beat and do her so? She said, “nothing,” other than she refused to be wife to dis man.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than marry a man in which she has no interest, Minnie Fulkes’ mother submits to repeated, brutal beatings from a sadistic overseer—a harsh elucidation of the price nonconforming enslaved women often had to pay for their agency in the plantation South.

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<sup>55</sup> Constance Sublette and Ned Sublette, *The American Slave Coast*, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Minnie Fulkes, interview with Susie Byrd, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Virginia Narratives, Volume 17.

Despite these risks, however, many African American women not only bypassed the altar, but even went so far as to (emphatically) root their decision to do so in an utter lack of interest in men and matrimony. Georgian Susan Matthews, for instance, when prompted by the interviewer to discuss her personal life, discloses:

I never did get married. I'se a old maid nigger, an they tells me you don't see old maid niggers. How come I ain't married I don't know. Seems like when I wus young I seed somep'n wrong with all de mens that would come around. Then atter awhile I wuz kinder ole an they didn't come around no mo.<sup>57</sup>

Rather than despair at her designation as “old maid,” Matthews appears to take pride in her unmarried status. This sentiment is echoed in the interviews of Lindy Patton—who boasts that she has “never married and never will”<sup>58</sup>—and Catherine Williams who laughs outright when confronted with the topic:

I have never married. I will have to find that man yet, and at this age I don't expect to find him. Ha! Ha! Never found that man yet.<sup>59</sup>

Once again, the notion of having not “yet” met any man worth marrying is invoked for what explanative power it wields in the insistence of women like Williams and Matthews to remain single.<sup>60</sup> Texan Rose Williams takes this one step further, relating (after detailing her experiences prior to the War, which included a violent stint as a non-consenting “breeder”):

I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience [with heterosexual coupling] am 'nough for dis nigger. After what I does for the massa, I's never wants no truck with any

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Matthews, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Georgia Narratives, Volume 4, Part 3.

<sup>58</sup> Lindy Patton, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

<sup>59</sup> Catherine Williams, interview with T. Pat Matthews, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2.

<sup>60</sup> Or at least unmarried; it is unclear what other types of relationships these women may have had.

man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but He have to ‘scuse me and look for some others to ‘plenish de earth.<sup>61</sup>

By refusing to have “truck” with any potential male suitors after Emancipation, Williams (as well as countless other female slaves with similar (dis)inclinations) reasserts authority over her body and—ultimately—her psychic well-being, in direct and conscious defiance of the prescribed existential templates by which such women were expected to organize their lives.

The prospect of remaining unwed, however, was not always (solely) a matter of choice, as is aptly demonstrated in the recollections of Arkansas resident Josie Martin, who lists as her “greatest pleasure” independence (which she defines as the ability to “make [her] money, go and spend it as [she] see[s] fit”), but then adds:

I wasn’t popular with men. I never danced...I had long straight hair nearly to my knees. It come out after a spell of typhoid fever. It never come in to do me no good. [Interviewer’s Note:] (Baldheaded like a man and she shaves. She is a hermaphrodite, reason for never marrying.)<sup>62</sup>

While it is unclear whether the interviewer’s description of Martin as intersex is accurate (especially given the fact that Martin does not use this language to describe herself), this seemingly imposed classification points to the utter illegibility of formerly enslaved African American women<sup>63</sup> whose gender presentations diverged from externally established norms—an illegibility that, in the case of Josie Martin, spurs both a

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<sup>61</sup> Rose Williams, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

<sup>62</sup> Josie Martin, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

<sup>63</sup> Which Martin identifies as

lack of “popularity” with men and a measure of thinly-veiled bafflement on the part of WPA employee Irene Robertson.

In her essay “Impossible Hermaphrodites: Intersex in America, 1620-1960,” author Elizabeth Reis maps conventional conceptions of intersex identity in the U.S. (amongst medical professionals as well as “laypeople”), tracing the means by which those representing corporeal ambiguity have historically had their bodies—paradoxically enough—declared both “impossible” and in need of correction.<sup>64</sup> Via her embodiment of ostensibly masculine attributes and actions (baldness, shaving, etc.), Martin occupies a space of physical crypticity that ultimately prompts her designation as that which (it was believed) could literally not exist. In other words, her deviation from the types of gendered performances observers such as Robertson would have found discernible renders Josie not just unmarriageable and unintelligible, but unimaginable.

Yet while these individuals may have declined (or been excluded from) the trappings of heterosexual marriage or coerced parenthood, they often *did* seek connection through alliances with other women. Understandings of “the Black family” that reduce it to the merely nuclear ignore “the very (queer) ways that Blackness...managed to persist”<sup>65</sup> even under the crushing weight of white cisheteropatriarchy. In lieu of prescribed relation, many enslaved African American women opted instead for chosen kin.

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<sup>64</sup> Elizabeth Reis, “Impossible Hermaphrodites: Intersex in America 1620-1960,” *The Journal of American History* 92 (2005).

<sup>65</sup> Snorton, *Nobody Is Supposed To Know*, 57.



An especially illustrative instance of this trend can be found in a tale related by former Arkansas resident Fannie Alexander. According to her mother-in-law, who worked as a “field hand:”

One day the overseer was going to whoop one of the women about sompin or other and all the women started with the hoes to him and run him clear out of the field. They would[‘ve] killed him if he hadn’t got out of the way...The women worked together...<sup>66</sup>

Much like with the heroine of Irene Coates’ yarn, the bucking of traditional feminine passivity here quells the senseless violence of an overzealous foreman (who—Alexander goes on to add—is himself Black). But while Coates’ overseer-slaying swashbuckler acts alone, it is the collective effort of a tight-knit group of women, “work[ing] together” in this latter account that banishes the cruel slavedriver from the field. In other words, security (ephemeral as it may have proven to be) was not always sought in the arms of a husband, but rather within the bond of Black female solidarity.

This bond extended beyond Emancipation, as childless, unmarried former female slaves struggled to situate themselves within an inhospitable social and economic landscape. Mag Brown, an Arkansas resident, describes how after being urged to leave her “white folks” in the years following Emancipation, she goes to stay with her interviewer’s grandmother (the relationship between the two women is unclear) whose household—interestingly enough—includes a white woman “who live[s] with them, like one of the family” and is where Brown learns marketable skills such as “how to cook and

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<sup>66</sup> Fannie Alexander, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

iron.”<sup>67</sup> Through these nonconventional networks of support, formerly enslaved African American women were able to sustain themselves (and each other) without bowing to the external pressure of heteronormative expectation.

These affiliations occasionally exceeded mere temporary alliances, constituting lifelong consociations that hinted at not just alternative means of care and survival, but perhaps even amore.

As author Adrienne Rich posits, women’s interconnections and exchanges exist on a “continuum” of sorts, by which one is able to make sense of “the many...forms of intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against [racial] tyranny, [and] the giving and receiving of practical...support”<sup>68</sup> in ways that do not work to further the long-standing historical erasure of potential queerness in homosocial spaces. A particularly elucidative illustration of these types of “support” and “bonding” is woven throughout Arkansas resident Dora Jerman’s descriptions of her grandmother, who maintains a close friendship with fellow former slave Aunt Polly up until the time of her death. Utilizing as an entry point to an extended meditation on the two women’s relationship the topic of her grandmother’s quilting, Jerman relates:

Grandma...used to have us [her grandchildren] sit around handy to thread her needles. She was a great hand to piece quilts. Her and Aunt Polly both. Aunt Polly was a friend that was sold with her every time. They was...the most pleasure to each other in old age...They come on a boat from Virginia to Aberdeen,

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<sup>67</sup> Mag Brown, interview with Sallie C. Miller, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

<sup>68</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15 (2003).

Mississippi. She and Aunt Polly was sold several times together till freedom. Grandma...lived to be way over a hundred years old...[but still] she died first. Then Aunt Polly grieved so. She was old, old when she died. They still lived close together, mostly together. Grandma [always] said, "I love [Aunt Polly] so good." Aunt Polly lessened her days grieving for [Jerman's grandmother].<sup>69</sup>

While her language is couched in the rhetoric of platonic intimacy, the narrator's insistence on emphasizing Aunt Polly's literal and emotional proximity to her grandmother—underscored both by the somewhat peculiar matter of the two women having always been sold as a pair as well as the fact that there is no mention of either woman ever being married—hints at a deeper connection. The intensity of the two women's attachment is emphasized via the invocation of an old, familiar trope whereby an individual (in this case, Polly) essentially dies of a broken heart after the passing of a loved one—a conceit generally reserved throughout the collection for (straight) widowed lovers,<sup>70</sup> thereby opening up a range of interpretive possibilities in considering what "loving [Aunt Polly] so good" may have meant for Jerman's grandmother. Jerman's account thus offers illuminative insight into the means by which women like Aunt Polly and her contemporary were plausibly able to secure for themselves "the most pleasure" possible within the rigid strictures of their social environment by tacitly forgoing the often coerced compulsory heterosexuality of the plantation South.

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<sup>69</sup> Dora Jerman, interview with Irene Robertson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 4.

<sup>70</sup> Clarissa Scales, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 4.

## SEXUAL EXPRESSION IN THE ETHEREAL

Enslaved Black women's rejection of white interventions and customs did not end with the familial, however, or even the terrestrial. Rather, "people of African descent retained elements of their original spirituality and combined them with European and Euro-American religious ideas and practices to craft a world view that provided them with resources for both survival and liberation."<sup>71</sup> This hybridity manifested in slaves' engagements with ghosts (ancestors),<sup>72</sup> charms/herbal remedies,<sup>73</sup> and conjurers.<sup>74</sup> These "esoteric" practices co-existed with and often were viewed as complements to African American Christianity while concomitantly "form[ing] a link with the slaves' ancient West African past"—one that represented a diasporic, epistemological means by which these individuals were able to make sense of their experiences and maintain some measure of control over their health, lives, and circumstances. Kentucky resident Elizabeth Alexander's enlistment of a local witch doctor's aid after her daughter falls mysteriously ill aptly demonstrates this point. Unable (or perhaps unwilling) to rely on "traditional" (read: Western) medicine, Alexander and the spiritual mediator she describes "brew a tea [made from the "life everlasting" weed] to bathe"<sup>75</sup> the girl's affected limb. In so doing, they are ultimately able to heal the malady without outside interference.

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<sup>71</sup> Will Coleman, "West African Roots of African American Spirituality," *Peace Review* 9 (1997): 533.

<sup>72</sup> Ella Johnson, interview with Samuel S. Taylor, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 4.

<sup>73</sup> Nellie Loyd, interview with G. Leland Summer, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3.

<sup>74</sup> Hannah Irwin, interview with Gertha Couric, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Alexander, interview with Cecelia Laswell, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Kentucky Narratives, Volume 7.

And although such avenues to wellness remained relatively universal within enslaved populations (given that the roles of witch doctors were not specifically gendered), the specter of the *witch* proved to be another matter entirely.<sup>76</sup> Indianan Sarah Colbert underscores the feminized conceptions of these apparitions maintained by the enslaved in detailing the antics of Jane, “the village witch,” who routinely “disturb[s] the slaves with her cat,” by having him appear at milking time and “go from one cabin to another, putting out the grease lamps with his paw.”<sup>77</sup> And while such “disturbances” may come across as relatively innocuous, witches’ interactions with slaves occasionally bypassed the frivolous and bordered instead on the carnal.

This carnality generally manifested in the form of covert nighttime romps during which these occult figures purportedly crept into women’s houses and “rode” them. As is demonstrated in the recollections of Penny Williams and Silvia Witherspoon, various measures were often taken to prevent such interactions, with mixed success:

I keeps a flour sifter an’ fork by my bed to keep de witches f’um ridin’ me. How come I knows dey rides me? Honey, I bees so t’reed in de mawnin’ I kin scarcely get outten my bed an’ its all on account of dem witches ridin’ me, so I putt de sifter dere to cotch ‘em.<sup>78</sup>

Yessum, one witch tried ter ride me onct. I wus in de bed, an’ she thought dat I wus ‘sleep. I feels her when she crawls up my lef’ leg an’ stops de circulation. I knows how ter fix her do’ so I gits up and puts a knife under my pillow. I has

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<sup>76</sup> Coleman, “West African Roots of African American Spirituality,” 538.

<sup>77</sup> Sarah Colbert, interview with Anna Pritchett, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Indiana Narratives, Volume 5.

<sup>78</sup> Silvia Witherspoon, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

slep' wid dat knife dar ever' since dat time an' I ain't had no mo' trouble wid witches ner circulation nother.<sup>79</sup>

These witchly visitations need not always be read as necessarily as unpleasant, however, as in the case of Josephine Anderson, who—when asked directly whether or not she believes in witches—responds:

S-a-a-y, I know more bout em den to jes 'blieve' —I been rid by em. Right here in dis house. You ain never been rid by no witch? Dey come in de night, ginnerly soon after you drop off to sleep. Dey put a bridle on your head, an' a bit in your mouth, an' a saddle on your back. Den dey get on you an' some nights dey like to ride you to death...When you hit de bed you jump an' grab de kivers, an de witch be gone, like dat. But you know you been rid mighty hard, cause you all wet wid sweat, an' you feel plumb tired out.<sup>80</sup>

Given that Anderson's description reads as more fantasy than warning, one is left to ponder the queer implications of this exchange. The sexual overtones inherent in the concept of being ridden until one is "all wet wid sweat" and "plumb tired out" are overt, and—considering the rampant feminization of witches throughout the accumulated interviews—that sexuality is being shared in Anderson's story between two female agents. Thus, while it is unclear whether Josephine Anderson is speaking literally or allegorically, in sharing her tale she is nonetheless staking a claim on her own "third body" as a space of (willfully) inscrutable sensuality that persists independent of white power, white men, and white mores.

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<sup>79</sup> Penny Williams, interview with Mary A. Hicks, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 11, Part 2.

<sup>80</sup> Josephine Anderson, interview with Jules Frost, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Florida Narratives, Volume 3.

## Chapter Two: The Auntie and the Plantation Mistress

Despite the numerous and complex means by which enslaved African American women resisted hegemonic claims on their bodies, self-determinations, and sexualities, however, the paternalistic structures of chattel slavery demanded that these individuals live not only in an “intimate [proximity] to death,” but to white slaveholders as well. This requisite proximity extended particularly to plantation mistresses, who were tasked with monitoring and (often violently) directing Black female slaves’ domestic labor. Rather than positing these women, however, as goodwill ambassadors “inspired by duty to care for their dependents...[and] fulfill the expectations of Southern womanhood”<sup>81</sup> (or benign allies and compatriots in the struggle against patriarchy), interventions into the complicated relationships to both power and African American women maintained by plantation mistresses offer ways to substantively explore the affective potentialities and limitations inherent to these relationships. For while “at best, emotional identification and brutality coexisted in [slave-owning women’s] behavior toward slaves,”<sup>82</sup> to elide the former in deference to the latter is to willfully undercut the possibility for Black feminine agency in the interactions between women in the Plantation South.

In a bid to “wholly historicize and memorialize U.S. chattel slavery as [solely] a site of suffering, violence, death, trauma, dehumanization, and exploitation,” scholars too often overlook the kinds of “radical Black interiority”<sup>83</sup> that may have rendered possible

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<sup>81</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 74.

<sup>82</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 87.

<sup>83</sup> Treva Lindsey and Jessica Marie Johnson, “Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom,” *Meridians* 12 (2014): 171.

other types of experiences. That more has not been written on the “erotic lives” of enslaved women is indicative of a widespread academic reticence to concede (much less theorize) the fact that African American women were not just “acted upon” but rather acted *within* a diverse range of intimate exchanges, and “not just with the heads of their households, whether Black or white—[indeed] not just, even, with men.”<sup>84</sup> Analysis of the potential constructions and dynamics characterizing these exchanges—especially as they involved female slaveholders—requires a creation of conceptual space in which to “imagine ecstatic moments for slaves, if only brief and painfully ephemeral”<sup>85</sup> as well as a comprehensive (re)consideration of who may have been present (and participant) in those ecstatic moments.

### **CRUEL MISTRESSES, ENCUMBERED CHOICE**

In her foundational work *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*,<sup>86</sup> historian Thavolia Glymph examines both the centrality of plantation mistresses to the maintenance and perpetuation of slavery as well as narratives of quotidian interracial violence from which these individuals are too often excluded. For despite overly simplistic depictions of the antebellum South as a geographic and temporal locale where (as Catherine Clinton puts it) “cotton was King, white men ruled, and both

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<sup>84</sup> Lindsey and Johnson, “Searching for Climax,” 181.

<sup>85</sup> Lindsey and Johnson, “Searching for Climax,” 189.

<sup>86</sup> Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).



white women and slaves served the same master,”<sup>87</sup> the reality is that slaveholding women, while certainly wielding less cultural capital than their husbands, cemented their exalted positions above the enslaved on the social hierarchy by “beat[ing] slave women and, more rarely, kill[ing] them in ways so disturbing that historians have judged them barbaric.”<sup>88</sup>

Such barbarism is evident in the recollections of Alabaman Delia Garlic, who discusses the cruelty of her (widowed) master’s daughter before adding:

Atter awhile, marster married ag’in; but things warn’t no better. I seed his wife blackin’ her eyebrows wid smut one day, so I thought I’d black mine jes’ for fun. I rubbed some smut on my eyebrows an’ forgot to rub it off, an’ she kotched me. She was powerful mad an’ yelled: ‘You Black devil, I’ll show you how to mock your betters.’ Den she pick up a stick of stovewood an’ flails it ag’in’ my head. I didn’t know nothin’ more ‘till I come to, lyin’ on the floor. I heard mistus say to one of de girls: ‘I thought her thick skull and cap of wool could take it better than that.’<sup>89</sup>

By positioning herself as one of Garlic’s “betters” before unceremoniously knocking her unconscious with a piece of kindling, Mrs. Carter manages to both (re)assert her power over her enslaved domestic while simultaneously distancing herself from Black femininity. Her perception of Garlic’s eyebrow blacking as a slight as well as her callous aside about the “thick skull and cap of wool” presumed capable of mitigating the force of her undue brutality underscore Carter’s investment in highlighting the alleged differences between both she and Garlic specifically and Black and white women

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<sup>87</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982): 35.

<sup>88</sup> Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 5.

<sup>89</sup> Delia Garlic, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

generally. Thus, rather than “serving the same master” as women in the misogynistic landscape of 19<sup>th</sup> century Alabama, Carter and Garlic stand as figures ineluctably separated—irrespective of gender—by their access (or lack thereof) to racial, classed, and corporeal control.

Attempts by enslaved women to reclaim some measure of this control was often met with increased malice from their mistresses, as in the case of Arkansas resident Adelaide Vaughn’s mother, who was hired out at the age of eighteen to a man who:

...was nice to her, but his wife was mean...just because mother wouldn’t do everything the other servants [did]. One day when it was freezing cold, she wanted mother to stand out in the hall with [fellow slaves] Sallie and Clara and wash the glasses in boiling hot water. She was making her do that because she thought she was uppity and she wanted to punish her. [Then, after being asked to provide more suitable rations] Mis’ Candle...told my mother that she was a smart nigger. She told my mother to do one thing and then before she could do it, she would tell her to do something else.<sup>90</sup>

Once again, rather than bonding together with her female slaves against the gendered dominance maintained by her husband (who is actually portrayed as the kinder of the two), Candle seeks to distinguish herself from Vaughn’s “uppity” mother by assigning her physically taxing and often impracticable duties rooted less in a genuine concern for plantation upkeep than in an unspoken yet unmistakable need to keep Black women in their place.

Despite these entrenched (and enforced) racial stratifications, however, female slaves and their mistresses routinely developed deep attachments to one another that, in

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<sup>90</sup> Adelaide Vaughn, interview with Samuel S. Taylor, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives Volume 2, Part 7.

many instances, extended beyond the platonic bounds of ‘slave loyalty’ and white benevolence in ways that allow for (perhaps even necessitate) careful scrutiny of “the irresolute pleasures between slave women and the mistress.”<sup>91</sup>

Such evaluations, though, are incontrovertibly complicated by questions of assent, given that Black enslaved women—while undoubtedly possessing agency—lacked, by definition, autonomy to make the “unencumbered choice”<sup>92</sup> to engage queerly with white women. In other words, while the archive, as Lindsey and Johnson point out, “demands imagination,”<sup>93</sup> there is little to be gained from imagining relationships between Black women and their female slaveholders that “automatically ameliorate[d] racial privilege and power”<sup>94</sup> since—given the political climate of the time—such amelioration was neither feasible nor possible. It is nonsensical to posit that African American slave women might have had consensual relationships with individuals who held over them absolute authority and whose ire could easily have led to revocations of privileges, material deprivations, and repeated whippings. Acquiescence obtained in the absence of possible rejection at best blurs the line between willingness and capitulation and at worst constitutes outright coercion.

However, to thus discount the intimacies shared between Black and white women in the Plantation South is to fail to take seriously female slaves’ awareness and negotiations of their own circumstances, along with the ways they may have channeled

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<sup>91</sup> Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 56.

<sup>92</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making In Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 104.

<sup>93</sup> Lindsey and Johnson, “Searching for Climax,” 189.

<sup>94</sup> Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 29.

these connections into opportunities for (admittedly limited) ascension or “elusive experience[s] of pleasure and joy.”<sup>95</sup>

### **POWER, PROXIMITY, AND PLEASURE**

Despite the wide range of vocational positions enslaved African American women occupied on the plantation, their work routinely “brought them in close contact with mistresses,”<sup>96</sup> as—from a young age—these individuals “were expected to wait on white women.” This “close contact” consisted largely of interactions as seemingly insipid as “helping [female slaveholders] dress and comb their hair,”<sup>97</sup> but also often included a proximity to and familiarity with slave women’s bodies that served to underscore the disparities in power between female residents of the rural South.

An anecdote related by former Indianan Betty Guwn aptly demonstrates this point. After detailing the extent of her master’s wealth (which becomes the source of some anxiety after the War commences in earnest), Guwn recalls that:

[One day] my mistress took me into a private room and had me remove most of my clothing; then she opened a strong box and took out a great roll of money in bills; these she strapped to me in tight bundles, arranging them around my waist in the circle of my body. She put plenty of dresses over this belt and when she was through I wore a bustle of money clear around my belt. I made a funny “figger” but no one noticed my odd shape because I was a slave.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 35.

<sup>96</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 7.

<sup>97</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 8.

<sup>98</sup> Betty Guwn, interview with William Webb Tuttle, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Indiana Narratives, Volume 5.

Thus, despite being sure to take Guwn to a secluded room before appending bundles of cash to her belt, Guwn's mistress makes it clear that the privacy she affords the woman described as her "personal attendant" only extends so far, effectually highlighting the ways in which white women's ownership of female slaves included unfettered access to not just their labor, but their bodies as well.

These corporeal claims did not end with the utilization of enslaved African American women as involuntary conduits of capital protection, however, as is illustrated in the recollections of North Carolina resident Harriet Ann Daves. The daughter of her (white) master, who "never denies [her] to anybody," Daves recounts that:

While [the family was] in Missouri some of my father's people, a white girl, sent for me to come up to the great house. I had long curls and was considered pretty. The girl remarked, 'Such a pretty [girl]' and kissed me. She afterwards made a remark to my father who was there, my white father, took exception [to him] telling her I was his child and that I was as good as she was. I remember this incident very distinctly.<sup>99</sup>

In sending for Daves to come up to "the great house" before admiring her looks and imposing upon her a display of unwanted physical (and perhaps sensual) affection, Daves' mistress establishes her ability to direct enslaved Black women's movement while simultaneously pointing to the ways in which a "representational focus on white male phallic brutality...leav[es] the history of the mistress' potential for sexual exploitation undertheorized,"<sup>100</sup> given that in this instance it is not the master—portrayed in Daves' account as protective father—who is positioned as being sexually extortive, but

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<sup>99</sup> Harriet Ann Daves, interview with T. Pat Matthews, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

<sup>100</sup> Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 35.

rather his female relative. Thus, although this unnamed “white girl” takes umbrage with the suggestion that Daves is in any way her equal, this obvious disdain does not prevent her attempts to initiate intimate contact with “such a pretty” (albeit presumably inferior) African American slave.

Proximity did not always preclude pleasure, however, as enslaved Black women—in endeavoring to “delight in their bodies”—were occasionally able to seize upon memorable, if fleeting, moments in which to delight in those of white female slaveholders as well. Take, for instance, the redolent retrospections of South Carolinian Anne Broome—who wistfully recalls her “pretty” mistress’ “flaxen hair [and] blue eyes”<sup>101</sup>—or Easter Lockhart, who describes her master’s wife as “look[ing so] good in white”<sup>102</sup> that she cannot stop herself from openly staring.

In her work, Stephanie M.H. Camp describes the dances and “illicit parties” Black plantation dwellers would (often covertly) organize as a means of both resisting planter control and finding temporary “release from [the] drudgery and sorrow”<sup>103</sup> of chattel slavery. This resistance was often impeded by the attendance of overseers and white landowners at these events, though their presence—as former Arkansas resident Mittie Freeman points out—occasionally opened up a wealth of new interactional possibilities.

When asked to reflect on the music of her youth, Freeman responds:

Did you ask somethin’ ‘bout old time songs? Sure did have purty music them days. It’s so long, honey, I jest can’t ‘member the names, ‘excusing one. It was “Hark from the Tombs a Doleful Sound.” [A dirge.] They was other music,

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<sup>101</sup> Anne Broome, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 1.

<sup>102</sup> Easter Lockhart, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3.

<sup>103</sup> Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 61.

though. Could they play the fiddle in them days, unh, unh! Lordy, iffen I could take you back and show you that handsome white lady what put me on the floor and learned me to dance the contillion!<sup>104</sup>

Freeman's shift from discussions of "doleful" funeral songs to those of nighttime promenades with handsome white "ladies" is indicative of the ways in which the enslaved sought to create and occupy space for levity amidst the death and demoralization characterizing their daily existences. Specifically, "dance and play," along with "music and song, [the ability] to feel, to be felt, [and] to have erotic sensations was to steal bodies back from masters"<sup>105</sup>—a theft complicated in Freeman's case by the fact that her accomplice is herself a member of the ruling class. Preoccupations such as queer cotillions, then, served "not [as] entirely liberatory [actions], but depictions of instances of irresolute resistance."<sup>106</sup>

Such irresolution was not confined to the dance floor, however, as is evident in the reminiscences of North Carolinian Lindsey Faucette. After outlining the details of a relatively uneventful childhood, Faucette discloses that:

Marse John wuz a great lawyer an' when he went to Pittsboro an' other places to practice, if he wuz to stay all night, Mis' Annie had my mammy sleep right in bed wid her, so she wouldn't be 'fraid.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the banality with which "mammy" and Miss Annie's intermittent nighttime dalliances are discussed, Faucette's tale actually represents a fairly significant break with

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<sup>104</sup> Mittie Freeman, interview with Beulah Sherwood Hagg, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 2.

<sup>105</sup> Lindsey and Johnson, "Searching for Climax," 187.

<sup>106</sup> Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 22.

<sup>107</sup> Lindsey Faucette, interview with Daisy Whaley, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

convention. For although enslaved women, as Weiner denotes, “sometimes slept in [mistresses’] rooms to provide any assistance that might be required during the night”<sup>108</sup>—a custom mentioned by countless others throughout the collection, including Texan Priscilla Gibson<sup>109</sup> and Alabaman Angie Garrett<sup>110</sup>—it was hardly common to have an adult slave sleep in the same bed as her female slaveholder; in fact, Faucette’s narrative is the only one examined that mentions such a practice.

In light of this, what can be concluded from—or, more to the point, what can be imagined within—the delectation of shared space and mutual comfort between these two women? Could keeping Miss Annie from being “fraid” have included other forms of contact (namely, the kinds only to be indulged when the master was away)? If so, then Faucette’s yarn speaks not only to the mistress’ power to get her slave into bed, but also to the potential pleasures available to them both upon her arrival.

## **FAMILY INTIMATES**

It is crucial to temper such considerations, however, by substantively grappling with the dispiriting aspects of slave subjectivity that historians and “neo-slave-narrative writers” alike have generally sought to envision as covertly liberatory moments of “heroism in disguise.”<sup>111</sup> Rather than dismiss as useless those facets of African American history that (seemingly) do not “tend toward the overcoming and surpassing of

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<sup>108</sup> Weiner, *Mistresses and Slaves*, 8-9.

<sup>109</sup> Priscilla Gibson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Texas Narratives, Volume 16, Part 2.

<sup>110</sup> Angie Garrett, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Alabama Narratives, Volume 1.

<sup>111</sup> Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: NYU Press, 2010): 5.



domination,” assessments of the means by which “the experience of being...abjected”<sup>112</sup> may have manifested in theoretically generative ways—including the complexly gratifying (if not narrowly emancipatory) interracial bonds forged between women in the Plantation South—must be undertaken in order for a more complete and less self-servingly revisionist rendering of the lives of the enslaved to be actualized. Thus, explorations of the ways Black female slaves navigated domination via willfully opaque expressions of agency may provide frames by which to understand how these individuals might have resisted their oppression while simultaneously ‘loving’ their oppressor.<sup>113</sup>

Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” offers means of parsing out this ostensible paradox by delineating the continuum of “woman-identified experience”<sup>114</sup> along which historical actors situated themselves and each other, in many cases defying the “unexamined heterocentricity”<sup>115</sup> through which they are routinely read. African American enslaved women and their white mistresses—independent and at times even in defiance of male intervention—shared not just physical intimacies (as previously discussed), but also resources, responsibilities, and—occasionally—entire lives.

Given that these exchanges were necessarily mediated by the deprivation and disparities of chattel slavery, affection was often wed (at least on the part of enslaved women) with pragmatism, as in the case of North Carolinian Betty Cofer who describes

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<sup>112</sup> Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 6.

<sup>113</sup> Numerous participants throughout the collection speak almost hyperbolically of their love for former mistresses. The narratives of Georgia Smith and Cordelia Thomas (cited in the bibliography) prove illustrative.

<sup>114</sup> Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 27.

<sup>115</sup> Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 11.

the enduring (and ultimately beneficial) attachment she develops to “Miss Ella” at a young age:

I waited on her and most times slept on the floor in her room. Muh was cook an’ when I done got big enough I holped to set the table in the dinin’ room. Then I’d put on a clean white apron an’ carry in the victuals an’ stand behind Miss Ella’s chair. She’d fix me a piece of somethin’ from her plate an’ hand it back over her shoulder to me. [Interviewer’s note:] (Eloquent hands illustrate Miss Ella’s making of a sandwich.) I’d take it an’ run outside to eat it. Then I’d...go back to stand behind Miss Ella again.<sup>116</sup>

In addition to whatever satisfaction may have been gleaned from Cofer’s persistent proximity to Miss Ella, her insistence on (literally and figuratively) standing behind her mistress allows Betty to access—albeit by proxy—sustenance that she would otherwise have been denied. Or in other words, Cofer’s ardor, as Matt Richardson puts it, grants her “some relief in a field of constraint through...relations with a female member of the master class.”<sup>117</sup> A similar trend plays out in the recollections of former Missouri resident Mrs. Charles Douthit, who after detailing the close, decades-long relationship maintained by her mother and “missus,” goes on to relate that “when de War was ober de missus gave ma muther some land an’ built her a beautiful home down dare.”<sup>118</sup> From provisions to property, alliances with white women often proved to be not only potentially pleasurable, but lucrative as well.

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<sup>116</sup> Betty Cofer, interview with Esther S. Pinnix, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

<sup>117</sup> Richardson, *The Queer Limit of Black Memory*, 24.

<sup>118</sup> Mrs. Charles Douthit, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Missouri Narratives.

It would be reductive to cast Cofer's connection to Miss Ella as entirely mercenary, however, as her longing depictions of the pair's adult interactions arguably exceed both the material and the platonic:

[After Emancipation] we stayed around here. Where could we go? [...] I couldn't go far away from Miss Ella...The rest of the family was all fine folks and good to me but I loved Miss Ella better'n anyone or anythin' in the world...If I ever wanted for anythin' I just asked her and she give it to me or got it for me somehow...I always did what I could for her too an' stood by her.

Thus, it would appear that the two women's bond was predicated less on benefaction than reciprocity—Miss Ella provided for Betty, and in return Betty “stood by her” through illness, old-age, and personal tensions.

This same brand of devotion undergirds the reminiscences of North Carolinian Fanny Cannady, who details extensively the negotiations employed by her mother and “Mis' Sally” amidst the brutal tyranny of an abusive master:

Everythin' [Master] tole [Miss Sally] to do she done. He made her slap Mammy one time kaze when she passed his coffee she spilled some in de saucer. Mis' Sally hit Mammy easy, but Marse Jordan say: 'Hit her, Sally, hit de Black bitch like she 'zerve to be hit.' Den Mis' Sally draw back her hand an' hit Mammy in de face, pow, den she went back to her place at de table an' play like she eatin' her breakfas'. Den when Marse Jordan leave she come in de kitchen an' put her arms 'roun' Mammy an' cry, an' Mammy pat her on de back an' she cry too.<sup>119</sup>

Evident in this anecdote are the limitations of the “bonding against male tyranny”<sup>120</sup> facing women like Sally and her female slave. Although the placing of “her arms 'roun'

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<sup>119</sup> Fanny Cannady, interview with Travis Jordan, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, North Carolina Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

<sup>120</sup> Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 27.

Mammy” indicates a shared intimacy between the two, neither this nor the facile attempt to “hit Mammy easy” does much to assuage the painful reality of the coerced violence in which Cannady’s mistress participates. Ultimately, with her own comfort and well-being potentially at stake, the most Miss Sally can offer Fanny’s mother by way of protection—regardless of the kind of alliance the women may have had—are her tears and her remorse.

This fact does not lessen the strength of Mammy’s fealty, however, as she makes abundantly clear upon Emancipation:

When de war ended Mis’ Sally come to Mammy an’ say: ‘Fanny, I’s sho glad yo’s free. Yo’ can go now an’ yo’ won’ ever have to be er slave no more.’ But Mammy, she ain’t had no notion of leavin’ Mis’ Sally. She put her arms ‘roun’ her an’ call her Baby, an’ tell her she goin’ to stay wid her long as she live. An’ she did stay wid her...Mammy stayed [with] Mis’ Sally ‘twell she died.

This exchange, much like the one preceding it, is characterized by the vocal and bodily affinity present in Miss Sally’s interactions with Cannady’s mother. Both the repeated physical embraces initiated by the two women as well as the use of endearments such as “baby” prompt careful consideration of the queer possibilities underlying these familiarities. Rather than conceiving of Mammy’s decision to stay with her mistress even after being given the option to leave as her acquiescence to classed paradigms and racial power, then, how could it instead be read as an instance of (admittedly encumbered) self-determination?

The recollections of former Arkansas resident “Aunt” Adeline Blakeley raise similar questions about the boundaries between concession and consent. The description

provided at the outset of Blakeley's transcript by her interviewer, Mary D. Hudgins (niece to Aunt Adeline's late mistress), proves particularly telling:

There is no hint of elision in the speech of Adeline Blakeley, scarcely a trace of vernacular. All of her life her associations have been with white persons. She occupies a position, rare in the post-slavery days, of Negro servant, confidante, and friend. After the death of Mrs. Hudgins, family intimates, wives of physicians, bankers' wives and other Fayetteville dowagers continued periodically to come see Adeline. They came not in the spirit of Lady Bountifuls condescending to a hireling, but because they wanted to chat with an old time friend.<sup>121</sup>

Barely masked behind Hudgins' seemingly innocuous musings on respect and friendship is the indicia of a certain homosociality emblematic of an untapped wealth of queer potential. Setting aside the fact that "family intimates" feeling compelled to visit Aunt Adeline at all following her mistress' passing mirrors the rites observed upon the death of a spouse, the gender of these well-wishers is also not without relevance. Blakeley spends her life (intentionally) surrounded by women, both before and after the War—a practice rendered eminently more conspicuous by the fact that she apparently never marries. Her intense fidelity to long-time employer and "confidante" Nora Hudgins, however, is especially significant.

Following Emancipation, Aunt Adeline opts to stay with the family under which she has been enslaved since birth, despite the fact that this decision evokes ire from other African Americans in the community who "tr[y] to fight [her]," "call [her] names," and even take to throwing rocks at her when she goes to draw water from the local

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<sup>121</sup> Adeline Blakeley, interview with Mary D. Hudgins, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 1.

neighborhood well. Central to Blakeley's resolve in the face of such staunch disapproval is her commitment to childhood companion and eventual employer, Nora—a commitment that perhaps hints at the intimated (if not verbalized) depths of the two women's mutual bond.

Though Nora eventually weds a Mr. Hudgins upon obtaining her college diploma and leaves her family estate, she does so with Aunt Adeline in tow, who becomes so integral to the Hudgins family infrastructure that she is called upon to make both financial and diurnal decisions within the home. When the hotel owned by Hudgins and her husband burns down, it is the grief and coping strategies of Nora and *Adeline* that are detailed; Mr. Hudgins is frequently rendered an afterthought (at most), his presence merely tangential to the evident connection between mistress and former slave. Indeed, Blakeley even positions herself as co-parent of Nora's children, relating that:

[After] the twins, Helen and Wade were born, I always went to see the show and took them with me. Folks watched them more than the shows. I kept them clean and they were so cute[...]I made money [during that time]. Why, the first evening dress Helen had and the first long pants Bud (Wade) had, I bought.

While it was of course hardly unusual for female slaves to express fondness for their white charges, both the dispensing of personal funds for the upkeep of the Hudgins children as well as the amount of *carte blanche* afforded Blakely in regards to their rearing far exceeds the typical.

This very flexibility is the focal point of fellow former slave Mary Jane "Mattie" Mooreman's account, during which she—after ascertaining the identity of her interviewer (the prolific Mary D. Hudgins)—relates:

[I] knew Miss Nora well. What's that? Did I know Adeline? *Did I know Adeline!* [...] I tell you Adeline's WHITE, she's white clean through! [Interviewer's note:] (See interview with Adeline Blakeley, who incidentally is as black as "the ace of spades"—in pigmentation.) Miss, you never knew anybody like Adeline. She bossed those children and made them mind—just like they was hers. She took good care of them [but] she made them mind. I remember once, she was down on Central Avenue with [Nora's son] and he did something or other that wasn't nice...She grabbed an umbrella and she whipped [him] with it. Then she put it back in the stand and said to the man who run the store, 'If that umbrella's hurt, just charge it to [the] Hudgins.'<sup>122</sup>

Although Mooreman's contention that Aunt Adeline's centrality to Nora's familial structure effectually renders her "white clean through" is certainly a bit far-fetched, it serves to underscore the anomalous nature of Blakeley's position. In bossing the Hudgins children and making them "mind—just like they was hers," Adeline establishes herself as both an authority within the household as well as a sort of second mother. This status is further reinforced by the insouciance with which Blakeley instructs the umbrella vendor to bill the Hudgins for any damages incurred in the disciplining of their children. As Mary points out in her initial note, Aunt Adeline (quite comfortably) occupies a rare standing as not just "Negro servant" or even friend, but personal confidante to Nora Hudgins; and while it is unclear exactly what types of confidences these two women may have shared, allowing for "the queer Black ancestor" to exist requires a "lens with which to comprehend the lived experience[s]"<sup>123</sup> of women in the Plantation South that neither evades nor elides the imaginable intimacies of "family intimates."

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<sup>122</sup> Mary Jane (Mattie) Mooreman, interview with Mary D. Hudgins, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 5.

<sup>123</sup> Lindsey and Johnson, "Searching for Climax," 169.

## Conclusion

Black women's "inherently laboring" bodies lie at the root of America's (denied but undeniable) national origins, and yet those bodies persist in being willfully misconceived, their highly visible invisibility continuing in perpetuity to do the work of sustaining national narratives that position them as the subhuman markers by which the majority can affirm its own humanity. Indeed, as Audre Lorde denotes in "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action:"

[Black women] have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. [In order] to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.<sup>124</sup>

Explorations of the archive that fail to address the means by which enslaved women both internalized this maxim while concurrently rejecting it excise opportunities to critically and queerly examine the resistance and reclamation shaping these women's embodied experiences. Historical accounts that reduce Black female slaves to the unerringly heteronormative conspicuously lack the capaciousness to contend with the figures like Arkansas resident Millie Johnson, who "quits" her husband without fanfare, refuses to remarry, and insists on being called "Old Bill,"<sup>125</sup> or South Carolinian Amy Chavis Perry, who recounts a dream from her youth in which she:

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<sup>124</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action," *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984): 42.

<sup>125</sup> Millie (Old Bill) Johnson, interview with Pernella M. Anderson, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume 2, Part 4.



...was in a field, a large green field. A girl was dere dat [she] didn't had no use for. [Perry] had a bundle on [her] back. [She] honey de girl up and love um and de bundle fall on de ground.<sup>126</sup>

The implications of such recollections are manifold, and—when examined with nuance—can speak to the myriad types of “radical Black interiority” with which enslaved African American women are so rarely credited. Thus, it would appear that the “stories to be told by those and about those who live[d] in such an intimate relationship with death” are ones of survival, adaptation, kinship and the numerous ways African American women managed to mobilize behind a complex body politics while still ostensibly bound by the spotted one-way glass of outward perceptions.

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<sup>126</sup> Amy Chavis Perry, *WPA Slave Narrative Project*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume 14, Part 3.

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